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ABSTRACT

A study created a model and instrument to determine and evaluate the factors that promote perspective transformation in the higher education classroom. The focus was the classroom setting, but other experiences and circumstances were recognized as being important determinants as well. An existing assessment model was used as the basis for identifying the factors. A questionnaire was developed and distributed to second- and third-semester college students. The participant questionnaires and interviews used a Likert scale and short answer format to rate how much the facilitating factors promoted the students' transformational learning. The questionnaire was presented in two different formats to two groups of students and reviewed by several educators. Several modifications were shown to be necessary: changing the focus to older students/adult learners; shifting from identifying to examining factors that promoted perspective transformation; changing the term "factors" to "activities"; and shortening and reconsidering the format of the instrument. Findings were as follows: the focus of the study had to be much sharper regarding age and educational experience of the participants; a greater number of participants was necessary; the specific perspective transformation to be studied needed to be focused; the study needed to examine learning activities; and the instrument needed to be modified in clarity, vocabulary, format, and ease of use. (Contains 18 references.) (YLB)

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IDENTIFYING FACTORS THAT PROMOTE PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A MODEL.

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ABSTRACT

Rooted in adult learning theory, this research sought to develop a model of inquiry regarding the identification of factors that facilitate perspective transformation in a higher education context. The research questions that were addressed were: 1) How can the factors that promote perspective transformation in adult education be identified? and 2) How do these factors compare in their effects on the process? An instrument based on the work of Matusicky (1982) and Williams (1985) was to be used to assess these factors. However, as the research progressed it became evident that several modifications of the research and instrument were necessary. This work is distinctive in several ways: 1) the attempt to develop an instrument to evaluate perspective transformation, 2) it's focus on a causal-comparative method, and 3) the instrument's empirical design.

INTRODUCTION

Adult educators are increasingly mindful of the many ways in which adult learners grow and change as a result of their educational experiences (Brookfield, 1986; Kegan, 1994; Taylor & Marienau, 1995). There are multiple links between adult learning and adult development; the connections are web-like because the two processes are interdependent and interface in many facets. Within this context, the process of adult development has been identified by some as a transition from one perspective scheme to another (Kegan, 1994; Taylor & Marienau, 1995). In turn, this process of a shifting perspective meaning has been identified as a perspective transformation by many theorists and researchers (Brookfield, 1986, 1995; Cranton, 1994; Mezirow & Associates, 1990). The questions addressed by this research were: How can the factors that promote perspective transformation in adult education be identified? and How do these factors compare in their effects on the process?

The research sought to answer these questions by crafting an instrument that would provide the desired empirical data. As the work of research, pilot studies, and related discussions progressed, the original research questions needed to be modified in several ways. The resulting model of research and prototype instrument prove valuable as guides for further work on this topic.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

Educators approach their work and research from diverse educational philosophies; one of these is a humanistic philosophy of education. It is the humanistic educator's great desire that the learner fully integrate new ideas, concepts and knowledge into their current knowledge base in order to reach their fullest personal potential. This is the process of the learner making the knowledge their own. With this as a primary objective of higher education (Tennant & Pogson, 1995), the educator needs to know how to encourage and facilitate this experience through the curriculum.

The perspective transformation theory was originally identified in women re-entering higher education (Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow (1991) describes the experience as "Rather than merely adapting to changing circumstances by more diligently applying old ways of learning, [adults] discover a need to acquire new perspectives in order to gain a more complete understanding of changing events" (p. 3). A similar view is represented by Brookfield (1986), "... significant personal learning might be defined as that learning in which adults come to reflect on their self-images, change their self-concepts, question their previously uncritically internalized norms, and reinterpret their current and past behaviors from a new perspective" (p.213). The perspective transformation process calls for critical thinking to focus on the learner's beliefs, values and

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understanding to compare them to new understanding and to "negotiate" an integration of the often diverse concepts (Brookfield, 1986).

Theorists, educators and researchers have openly discussed and criticized Mezirow's work in order to further refine the perspective transformation theory (Cranton, 1994; Taylor, 1996; Tennant & Pogson, 1996). In addition, several researchers/authors have specifically discussed how to bring transformative learning into the classroom (Brookfield, 1986; Cranton, 1994; Mezirow & Associates, 1990; Taylor, 1996), and their focus has been on developing curriculum that will promote transformative learning. However, the variables that affect transformational learning are many, and little research has been done to empirically evaluate them (E. Taylor, 1995). This is especially true of the theory's application in higher education.

A review of the literature has confirmed the findings of E. Taylor in "Beyond the Rhetoric; What do Empirical Studies Say About Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory?" (1995) that there are few empirical assessment models to choose from for this proposed research. Perspective transformation has been studied primarily with qualitative methods; the subject matter truly lends itself to this methodology because of the central place of individual experience in perspective transformation (Shaw, 1993). Nonetheless, a more positivistic study could provide valuable information about the role of individual factors and their interrelationships. Therefore, this study was to use a causal-comparative model adapted from earlier educational research (Matusicky, 1982; Williams, 1985).

The factors that educators believe promote transformational learning have been noted in the literature. Among those noted are several teaching methods: journaling, self-assessment and the use of critical incidents (Brookfield, 1995; Cranton, 1994). They have not; however, been examined and documented as to their causal effect on perspective transformation or compared one factor to another. The factors that were expected to be included in the original research proposal were: student self-assessment (K. Taylor, 1995; Taylor & Marienau, 1995), critical thinking assignments (journals, critical incidents, collaborative work) (Brookfield, 1986; Cranton, 1994; Mezirow & Associates, 1990), the learning environment, teacher input/dialogue, peer input/dialogue, student support services, age, family support, life changes, external confrontation, inner disillusionment (Scott, 1991), and development of one's voice (Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Kegan, 1994; Taylor & Marienau, 1995).

THE RESEARCH MODEL

The proposed research was to create a model and instrument by which the factors that promote perspective transformation in the higher education classroom could be determined and evaluated. The focus was the classroom setting, but because transformational learning encompasses the entire life of the learner, other experiences and circumstances were recognized as being important determinates as well. The research was to use an existing assessment model as the basis for identifying the factors. A questionnaire was to be developed and distributed to second and third semester college students. The participant questionnaires and interviews were employing a Likert scale and short answer format to rate how much the facilitating factors promoted the students' transformational learning.

This questionnaire was presented in two different formats to two groups of students and reviewed by several educators. The first group of students were a graduate education class (N=15) and they reviewed the initially proposed instrument as a group discussion. The results of this discussion resulted in many alterations in the questionnaire; it was this revised format which a second group of undergraduate students (N=8) were asked to fill out. Discussions with several educators provided further insight into the focus and format of the instrument (P. Lawler, personal communications, May 1996; June 1996; G. Shaw, personal communication, February 16, 1996; K. Taylor, personal communication, January 31, 1996; March 31, 1996; R. Thurlow, personal communication, June 1996, R. Wright, personal communication, April, 1996). The questionnaire garnered substantial comments and encouragement from the educators, and sparse results from the non-educators. This demonstrated several additional alterations that were

necessary and that would significantly change the initial research model and the instrument before a more comprehensive study could be conducted.

NECESSARY MODIFICATIONS

CHANGES IN FOCUS. First was the realization that students who had been participating in a higher education setting for several semesters needed to be targeted. The topic and survey demanded an older student, an adult learner, with a breadth of adult education experience from which to draw observations about a perspective transformation. This began to move the focus of a continuation of the study from one local two-year college to several adult education programs within higher education in the geographical area. This was further confirmed as the trial study demonstrated the necessity of having a significant number of participants in order to be able to examine perspective transformation. A 2:1 ratio began to be considered as a guideline for further studies where 200 surveyed students might yield 100 who had a perspective transformation related to their education; this decision was based on discussions and collected data.

Another aspect of changing the focus of the study was that of the perspective transformation itself. The instrument was not explicit enough to prompt responses about perspective transformation in education. Finally, the factors (i.e., self-assessment, critical thinking, learning environment, etc.) that were being considered were too broad and would need to be trimmed in number and grouped. In an attempt to cover all of the factors and identify them with perspective transformation stages, the instrument became unwieldy in size.

IDENTIFY TO EXAMINE. How were the factors being assessed in this research project? Initially the aim had been to "identify and isolate" the factors that promoted perspective transformation. But in fact, these factors had already been noted in the literature, and the study was actually testing whether they truly effected the perspective transformation as expected. This would change the focus from "identifying" or "isolating" the factors to "examining" the factors previously identified in the literature. The aim of the research became: "Through examination, provide evidence to show whether the expected factors really promote transformational learning in adult learners."

FACTORS TO ACTIVITIES. A third major area of change was regarding the word "factors." As the research progressed and thought was given to analyzing results, the term became confusing. Usually in statistical analysis a factor is a construct that represents several variables grouped together (e.g., factor analysis). Furthermore, the primary aim of the research was to evaluate what was done in the classroom to promote perspective transformation rather than the effects of life experiences and other influences. Certainly these other influences were powerful, but the study had to have reasonable and clearly defined limits. Indeed, the literature focused on the learning activities and the aim of this research was to evaluate them as to causality and perhaps their inter-relationships. These observations resulted in the modification of the original term, "factors," to the more precise "activities." The research question had now become: "Examining activities that promote perspective transformation among adult learners in higher education."

CHANGES IN THE INSTRUMENT. The changes in the instrument that were indicated were many. This has demonstrated the need for more extensive interviews and pilot studies to provide information for the emerging instrument. However, the task at hand was much larger and more difficult than previously expected, and the final changes in the instrument are still in progress and will be fully documented at the conclusion of that additional research.

The vocabulary of the instrument proved confusing for those unfamiliar with perspective transformation. The original instrument was patterned after Williams' (1985) professional evaluation instrument that used ten statements to represent the ten perspective transformation stages delineated by Mezirow (1991). The study conducted in this project was a self-report where the participant was to use a Likert scale and rate modifications of Williams' items. They were then asked to rate those activities and experiences that influenced each stage. This created a very lengthy instrument that provided sparse, inconclusive data. Clearly, information needed to

be gathered regarding the language that would best communicate the research concern to the participants. One major obstacle was that the perspective transformation experience needed to be clearly described in non-education jargon for the participants.

The format of the instrument also needed to be reconsidered. As stated, the instrument had become too lengthy, and a better focus on the research is needed to bring it into a more manageable form. This was a self-reporting instrument and as such it needed to be "user-friendly" even for non-education major undergraduate students. Too many words and too many items would make this survey both unappealing and continue to cause the cooperating sample size to shrink.

Instructions for the use of the instrument also needed to be more clearly stated. The instructions referred to adult development and education, but the students had difficulty understanding the concept of a perspective transformation from the brief, technical descriptions embedded in the items they were rating. Another format would illicit terms and explanations more readily comprehensible to the sample.

CONCLUSION

As this research began, an existing assessment instrument was to be modified in order to "identify the factors that promote perspective transformation in higher education." At the close of this phase of the research, the focus has transformed to "examining activities that promote perspective transformation among adult learners in higher education." The research was critical in delineating concerns, concepts and methodologies that needed to be reconsidered in such a study.

In summary, significant findings of this work were that 1) the focus of the study had to be much sharper regarding the age and educational experience of the participants, 2) a greater number of participants than anticipated would be necessary, 3) the specific perspective transformation that was to be studied needed to be focused, 4) the study needed to be identified as an "examination," or testing, of learning activities cited in the literature and this needed to be recognized, 5) "activities," rather than factors, was a more accurate description of the items assessed in the study, and 6) the instrument needed to be greatly modified in clarity, vocabulary, format and ease of use. The research that was conducted highlights the difficulties inherent to the creation of an instrument to assess perspective transformation experiences in education. It has focused the research and exposed hidden research assumptions. In addition, it has laid groundwork for future endeavors in this area.

Based on these findings, additional research queries should be conducted into the transformational learning process in adult and higher education. The research model and prototype instrument presented in this study could serve as a basis for future empirical inquiries into transformational learning. Not only the activities in the higher education classroom should be investigated, but also the effects of factors that could not be included in this study (i.e., the many facets of the classroom environment, life changes, inner disillusionment, etc.). Research methods that would facilitate carefully crafting a more effective instrument should include interviews and pilot studies.

Adult learning and adult development share common ground in transformational learning. As adult educators and researchers continue to explore and understand this relationship it will produce many insights into educational practice. As we understand more about transformational learning, continued research could impact adult education curriculum, program planning, teaching methods and support services.

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